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AUTHOR(S):

IKELEGBE, Augustine

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## BEYOND THE THRESHOLD OF CIVIL STRUGGLE: YOUTH MILITANCY AND THE MILITIA-IZATION OF THE RESOURCE CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

Augustine IKELEGBE

*Department of Political Science & Public Administration,  
University of Benin*

**ABSTRACT** The resource agitations and conflicts in the oil rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria that were originally civil and communal have since been transformed into armed struggles conducted by disparate youth militia groups. Crime, violence and insecurity, state militarization, ethnic militia-ization and communal and ethnic wars now pervade the region. The study analyzed the youth militancy and militias in the context of deep economic and resource crises and found that multinational oil company strategies and state repression conducted the emergence and consolidation of the militia phenomenon from the youth who are plagued by unemployment and poverty. The study also found that infiltration of political elites, loss of focus and poor control have combined to turn the militias into perpetrators of crime, violence and insecurity and agents of private interests and greed. The consequences of militancy and militia-ization have been very disruptive and devastating to the economy, governance, inter-group relations, communal cohesion and security of the Niger Delta region.

**Key Words:** Oil; Conflict; Youth; Militias; Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

The resource agitation of the Niger Delta has since 1997 acquired a very militant and violent dimension. What began as community agitation has undoubtedly undergone several transformations. The first profound transformation was the flowering of civil society which mobilized a popular civil struggle. In the second, the transformation was extended from that against the multinational oil companies (MNCs) to include the Nigerian state. The third transformation was the elevation of the agitation from pure developmental issues to include the political demands such as federal restructuring, resource control and the resolution of the national question through a conference of ethnic nationalities.

A second dimension saw the entrance of youths, youth militancy and youth militias with volatile demands and ultimate that elevated the scale of confrontations and violence with the MNCs and the state. More recently, youth activism and militancy has become associated with a dangerous tide of abductions of expatriate and indigenous staff, hostage and ransom taking and economic crimes such as sea piracy, pipeline vandalization and oil pilferage. There is a large scale proliferation of arms among youths, youth groups and militias.

In the current and fourth stage of the transformation, the struggle has turned

the region into an arena, first of economic crimes, violence, wars between ethnic and communal groups and the general criminalization of social life. Second, the region has been turned into a battle zone between militias and the Nigerian state. The situation is such that recent policy has been the massive deployment of the Nigerian Army and Navy to create an enabling environment for oil exploitation and to restore confidence of oil operators (Adebayo, 2003). The Niger Delta today is in a state of generalized insecurity which has to some extent, undermined the economy of the production of crude oil, the revenues and profits accruable to both the state, oil producing and servicing companies, local and communal governance and the security of lives and property. Some youths engage in self-interest and factional fighting, attracting criminals from the region and otherwise to cash in on the agitation and insecurity to perpetuate economic crimes. Already the waterways, creeks and rivers have become unsafe.

The situation of kidnappings of foreign nationals has aroused the interest of national security agencies of affected countries in the protection of their citizens. The British police force is said to be active in the Niger Delta, in the investigation and facilitation of the release of Britons affected (Bisina, 2003). The situation of sea piracy has led to recommendations of a federal waterways safety corp. The Bayelsa State governor in August 2003 declared a full war to rout out sea piracy. According to him, "this area belongs to all of us. Ours is a classic case of transferred aggression" (Akanimo, 2003).

The youth dominance in the present regime of violent agitation and confrontations, the emergence of the phenomenon of youth militias and the consequent transformation of the intensity, volatility, tenor and methodology of the conflict require analytical consideration.

## THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Nigerian population as in all of Africa is quite youthful. A major proportion of the Nigerian population is between the ages of 15-35. Youth ordinarily is a social category of early adulthood, emerging in activity and involvement in society but somewhat limited by societal values and some level of dependency and perhaps agency (Durham, 2000). The meaning, definition and specification of youth is situational and culture specific. The African concept of youth is quite broad in its chronological specification and role.

As a demographic and social category, the youth possess certain self perceptions, ideas, value systems, attributes and behavior patterns. Placed in relational terms, the physical, psychological and socio-cultural attributes of youth, conjoined with society and its institutions, results in a culture, orientation, and behavior (Wyn & White, 1996) particularly, the youths experience considerable tensions and conflicts in the process of social and physical maturation and in the adjustment to societal realities. The youths struggle for survival, identity and inclusion. These struggles and challenges shape how the youths as a social group respond to or more broadly relate to society and the state in terms

of engagement or disengagement, incorporation or alienation, rapprochement or resistance, integration or deviance.

In Africa, the peculiar material conditions in which the youth are immersed have been anything but friendly and supportive. Specifically, the governance and economy of African states have largely created the conditions for the youth problematic. Inept and corrupt administrations, poor leaderships, state abuse, declining legitimacy and pervading erosion of authority pervades the political process. Prolonged militarism, state repression and violence and the accompanying regime of macho-ism, bravado, decisive and summary actions and suppression have created in the youths a culture that is tolerant of violence (Momoh, 2000).

The economic crisis has persisted if not gotten worse. Poverty, immiseration, inflation, massive job losses, unemployment, decadent services and infrastructures and social dislocations persist. Democracy which has been euphorically touted as the antidote to these circumstances has been further associated with corruption, misrule, violence, and persisting decline. But more importantly, it has created a paradox of sorts. While empowering the youths, it has sustained the representational limitations as well as the instrumental conception of youth as subject to manipulation and violence. In the new democracies therefore, the youth have remained a problem segment.

The major manifestations of the state, governance and development crises in Africa are youth based. Further, the contradictions of Africa's political economy has made the youth more vulnerable, deprived, neglected and more confronted with the "emotive and troubling images" of youth (Muncie, 1999). The difficult adjustment to multifarious crises has generated mass disillusionment, frustration and anger, and disorientations, public distrust and loss of confidence. Further, it has been manifested in the tending of the youth towards shattering, countering and resisting and undermining the restrictions, controls, ethos, and the social fabric of society. The emerging youth orientation has been more assertive, activist and engaging, rebellious, aggressive and violent and devoid of control and restraint. Its largely negative orientation has produced and is indicated in the phenomenon of militia groupings, vigilantes, private armies, child soldiers, armed groups, gangsters and secret cults in which the youth has had huge participation and with which the African youth has been identified in recent years. In Nigeria, this has been indicated in the emergence of youth activism, radicalism, cultism and an under-class of street urchins (area boys/girls), touts and prostitutes (Adisa, 1997). In addition, the youth frustration has been directed at and tended towards deviance, delinquency, crime and violence.

Therefore the youth in Africa can be described as a social category in crisis. They have been characterized as excluded, marginalized, threatened, victimized, abused, problematic, frustrated and violent. The anger, frustration and bitterness resulting from the multifarious crises and the ensuing negative orientations are compounded by their constituting a large pool that is amenable to all sorts of manipulations by political, cultural and other elites and the fact that they can easily transform their bitterness and frustration into violence. In the

circumstance, it is not surprising that the youths have turned against the society and specifically against the public and corporate governance and other objects of their marginalization and frustration.

In political terms, the youth represents a contradiction of weakness and power. There is at the same time, powerlessness, dependency and a search for relevance and space in an adult, elite dominated terrain amidst a youth power underlined by the huge potential for political action, rebellion and subversion (O'Brien, 1996; Durham, 2000). When the concept of youth is viewed in terms of claims to power and power sharing, then what emerges is, in relation to the adult category, a contestation between privilege and mass action, autonomy and dependency, caution and non-restraint and establishment and counter-hegemony. It is in this perspective that the political definition and utility of youth has been undertaken in which the youth becomes populist, radical and oppositional. It is this appropriation of youth identity in power terms that also underlines the youth activism and militancy in political and resource struggles as well as their manipulation or utilization in succession and power struggles.

My central question is: what translates youth frustration and despair into mass action, insurgency and confrontations?

Most scholarly works have tended to see the translation as rooted in a negative youth culture (Olawale, 2003). The source of this culture is regarded variously. Kaplan (1994) saw it in socio-environmental terms: urban congestions, polygamy, disease, environmental stress and superficial religion. What is created is a new barbarism of crime and violence. Richards (1996) saw the phenomenon as rooted in the collapse of the educational and social service systems, unemployment and physical hardships. The emergence of violence and armed rebellion is then a response of frustrated youths against a failing or collapsing state and state institutions and services underlined by neo-patrimonial practices and political failures. Abdallah (1998) saw the emergence of a negative youth culture as a subaltern phenomenon, a lumpen class of half educated, un-employed and un-employable, informal or underground economy-based, marginal youths prone to indiscipline, crime and violence. The lumpen youths and their negative culture would transform into opposition and challenge, and into constituting the support base for violent struggles. The lumpen youth are also at the centre of the emergence of an obsession with violence and violent changes.

These three researchers therefore ascribed the youth involvement in criminal violence and armed rebellion in a disposing youth culture that is rooted in environmental stress (Kaplan, 1994), frustrated youth response to state decay (Richards, 1996) and lumpen youths (Abdallah, 1998). A contrary argument has been posited by Olawale (2003). In his casualty thesis, he opined that the transformation was a casualty of state weakness and collapse. The weak and failing public authorities, neo-patrimonialism, corruption, repression, abuse and other manifestations of state decay generate armed insurgencies and civil wars which pervert youth culture.

Situating the phenomenon of youth crime, violence and armed rebellion in a

negative youth culture has several weaknesses (Olawale, 2003). First, it generalizes an all inclusive and monolithic negative youth culture and presents it as tending in one direction in terms of manifestation and response. But the negative youth culture may actually be merely a minority youth manifestation within diverse, complex and plural youth cultures which are quite visible. The generality of youths, though plagued by the same socio-political, economic and environmental catastrophes, retain or exhibit behaviors and dispositions that are positive and non-rebellious in relation to the state and groups. But this youth segment, which is perhaps the majority, is neglected in the analysis. Second, the much harped on negative youth culture is not specific to Africa. There are elements of a somewhat globalized youth culture in terms of activism, aggression, deviance and ideologies, vocabularies and other tendencies that are general to the youths, even outside the continent. But the youth culture, negative as it is, has not generated a worldwide cauldron of armed rebellion.

The above literature on youth has been in relation to a specific context: Sierra Leone and more broadly, the Mano River States. It may be too simplistic to generalize these postulations to different contexts, even in sub-Saharan Africa. This is more so when part of the problematic of the concerned scholars was whether youth culture was a cause or casualty of state collapse, which is not germane to us here. This is why I seek other explanations of why the youths in the Niger Delta have tended towards militancy and militias in the struggles for equity and justice in the political economy of oil.

Resource-rich environments may create and generate problems and potentials that tend towards violent criminality. Richard (1996) noted that the opportunity for illegal exploitation, quick enrichment and the physical hardships associated with mining in the diamond-rich rain forests of Sierra Leone were attractions for and a conditioning environment for youth agitation and violence. Apart from the opportunities created in resource-rich environments, the pursuits of grievances resulting from the configuration of costs and benefits may also generate resource conflicts, resource-based armed insurgencies and wars. But Collier (2000) asserted that the struggle for resource opportunities tended more towards conflicts and violence than grievances.

These conditions of frustration arising from economic crisis, grievances arising from the political economy of resource exploitations and the struggle over opportunities, benefits or costs in resource-rich regions may not in themselves translate into violent contentions and armed struggles. Certain other conditions or conducting factors have to be present.

The opportunity structure for agitation and struggle shapes the choices of marginalized or allegedly oppressed groups and mediate or shape the nature of challenge or contention (Esman, 1994). Where the space and avenues for peaceful challenges and for civil struggles are so constricted, there may be transformation towards militant and violent contentions. Particularly, the collapse of dialogic processes, more especially, the realization or perception of futility or non-relevance of dialogue, tends challenges and struggles towards militancy and violence (Wilson, 2001). State authoritarianism and repression also tends to con-

duce political mobilization, political unrests and militant civil struggles (Warren, 1993). As Zolberg (1968: 67) claimed that constant state coercion stimulated the deployment of violence by repressed groups both as an expression of non-support and resistance.

The tendency towards militant and violent contentions is further reinforced by the depth of grievances and frustration. As Esman (1994) noted, beyond a certain threshold, a frustrated group would challenge even a strong state. Then there is the existence of real or perceived threats or aggression. This tends to translate agitations into violent challenges supposedly for survival and self defense (Esman, 1994: 244). The potential for successful challenge may be a motivating factor in militant contentions (Esman, 1994). Weak and collapsing states characterized by declining public authorities and legitimacy, and declining control over agencies of coercion tend to be more susceptible to violent challenges.

By way of conceptual clarifications, militancy refers to a combative and aggressive activism or engagement in struggles for identified causes. Intense militancy can develop into armed engagements and the formation of militias. Militancy then may precede or be accompanied by the emergence of militias. A militia is an armed, informal civilian group who are engaged in some paramilitary, security, crime and crime-control functions in the projection or defence of communal, ethnic, religious and political causes. More specifically, as in Africa, militias are usually youths, in some organized form that are engaged in vigilantism, crime and crime-control, communal and ethnic wars, resource conflicts and struggles for political power. When a militant struggle slides into that conducted by militias, the struggle and conflict environment becomes militia zed.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research questions include: How do youths perceive and respond to resource conflicts? What social, economic and political processes conduce youth radicalization and militancy in resource conflicts? What factors transform youth alienation and acquiescence into engagement and resistance? What factors enable the youth appropriation of ethnic and regional identity and cultural symbols and institutions in resource conflicts? Can youth militancy and militias lose focus and become so perverted that they become purveyors of insecurity and crime? What are the consequences of militia-ized resource conflicts?

The questions raise the need to investigate three propositions. First, the nature of state and MNCs responses to youth agitations conduced the emergence of youth militancy and the militias. Second, the youth militancy and militias tend to be associated with loss of control and focus resulting in violence and insecurity. Third the militias are imbedded in and sustained by their community and ethnic kin.

The study relied on secondary and primary data. Secondary data sources were



newspapers, magazines, reports and documents. For primary data, I conducted a survey research, two in-depth interview schedules, one with youth militia members (YMI) and the other with opinion leaders (OLI), and five focus group discussion sessions (FGD). The focus group discussions investigated the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the dimensions, activities and consequence of the militia phenomenon.

The sampling technique was largely purposive. This was in part because of the sensitivity of the issues investigated which warranted utmost caution. The sample sizes were 50 survey interviewees (SI), 10 in-depth youth militia member interviewees (YMI), and 10 in-depth opinion leader interviewees (OLI). The size of the focus group discussants (FGD) ranged from 3 to 9. All the research interviews and discussion sessions took place between February and April 2003. My focus was on the militant youth movements of the Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta that spans six of the nine oil producing states in Nigeria: Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Aqua Ibom. The research was conducted in Bayelsa State, the main base of the Ijaw and the hotbed of the intense agitation, militia activities and militia confrontations with the state since 1997. Because of the logistic and security limitations, the interviews and FGDs were conducted in Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State. I identified and categorized the core responses from the YMI, OLI and FGDs. On the basis of the categorization, I provide tables of the response frequency. To ensure complementarity, these categories were broadly related as closely as was possible with the response categories of the SI.

The social characteristics of the samples were quite varied. The youth militia in-depth interviewees (YMI, 10) comprised youths who were largely in age set 20-39 (50%), male (80%), married (90%), Christian (100%) and of the Ijaw ethnic group (100%). They were educated at the secondary school level and beyond (100%) and were mostly public servants or businessmen or self employed (90%). The opinion leader in-depth (OLI) sample (10) comprised respondents who were in the age sets 30-39 (50%) and 40-49 (50%), male (80%), married (80%), Christian (100%), had post secondary education (70%) and were either public servants (50%) or businessmen/self employed (50%). The survey interview (SI) sample (50) comprised respondents who were between 30-39 years old (34%) and 40-49 (32%) and were largely male (68%) and married (74%). They were Christian (100%), Ijaws (68%), educated at the secondary (26%) and post secondary school levels (70%) and were mostly public servants (60%) and businessmen/women or self-employed (22%).

There were 5 FGDs which altogether had 32 participants. FGD I comprised 8 participants, FGD II, 8 and FGD III, 3. FGD IV had 8 participants and FGD V, 5. The mean ages were FGD I, 32.8; FGD II, 36.4; FGD III, 42.3; FGD IV, 37.3; and FGD V 33.8. All the participants were from the Niger Delta region and were Christians. In terms of over-all representation, they were mostly male (87.5%), educated at the secondary (25%) and post secondary levels (50%) and public servants (62.5%) or businessmen/women and self-employed (25%).



## PRESENTATION OF DATA

## I. PROFILE OF THE EGBESU MILITIAS

The social profile of the Egbesu militia is that of a largely youthful, male Ijaw. It is a recent phenomenon, with most members having joined between 1995 and 1999. Many are school drop-outs and poorly educated, often from the low socio-economic class. Membership is voluntary as personal conviction and decision tend to be a stronger influence on membership than peer influence. Membership tends to be related to the depth of feelings about the alleged neglect, marginalization, injustice and under-development against the Ijaw. It is also a product of ethnic mobilization as some have joined the militia bandwagon as a result of ethnic patriotism and solidarity. The process of becoming a member involves volunteering, registration and initiation. The latter involves a bath in which Egbesu water is sprinkled, the Egbesu spirit is invoked and body incision is made.

## II. REASONS FOR THE YOUTH MILITIA PHENOMENON

The alleged neglect and marginalization of the Ijaw nation in spite of its huge oil contribution is indicated as the major factor that has generated the phenomenon (Table 2). This suggests that there is a keen awareness of the situ-

**Table 1.** Social Profile of Militial Members.

Social Characteristics of Respondents		Survey Interviewees (SI)	
Age	-14	-	-
	15-24	21	(42%)
	25-34	26	(52%)
	35-44	3	(6%)
	44-	-	-
Sex	MALE	50	(100%)
	FEMALE	-	-
Socio-economic background	LOW INCOME	45	(90%)
	MIDDLE INCOME	5	(10%)
	HIGH INCOME	-	-
Other characteristics	SCHOOL DROP- OUTS	13	(26%)
	UNEMPLOYED	20	(40%)
	OTHERS	17	(34%)

ation by the Ijaw nation. It further suggests deep and broad grievance relating to the issues of intense dissatisfaction with power and resource distribution in the Nigerian state. A sampler of reasons adduced from the FGD is quite illuminating: “resource exploitation without adequate benefits,” “we contribute so much and get so little;” “neglect by the federal government and oil companies,” and “people (state officials) usurp authority and allocate resources irrationally to favor their group.” Quite related to ethnic marginalization is political exclusion and inequity in the Nigerian state. In fact, the YMI and FGDs regard this as a major factor in the struggle and its militia-ization.

Unemployment and poverty are major problems that facilitate the phenomenon. Particularly unemployment among the educated youths has radicalized them. The FGDs indicated that “when 80% of our youths are unemployed,” “the harsh conditions have become unbearable,” “when those marginalized are now hungry, they brazenly resort to violence.” But beyond these seeming altruistic factors are the roles of politicians and opinion leaders. The militia phenomenon is to some extent a creation of political, ethnic and community leaders, who encourage, sponsor and control the militia groups for some political and personal objectives. This is clearly indicated in the SI sample response (Table 2).

The phenomenon is also a result of the attitude of the state and the MNCs to use force and to repress agitation. The repression of “dialogue or constitutional means of achieving desired goals by the minorities to fail” (FGD). The responses from the FGD are quite illustrative: When “those in authority instead

**Table 2.** Reasons for the Youth Militia Phenomenon.

Respondents Reasons	SI		FGD		YMI	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Ethnic marginalization/ neglect	16	32	16	50	3	30
Political exclusion and inequity	2	4	5	16	3	30
Unemployment	15	30	4	13	-	-
Poverty	5	10	2	6	-	-
Political manipulation	7	14	-	-	-	-
Youth exuberance	2	4	-	-	-	-
Ethnic solidarity	3	6	-	-	-	-
State repression/ configuration	-	-	2	6	3	30
Attitude of MNCs	-	-	3	9	1	10
Total	50	100	32	100	10	100

SI: Survey Interviewees

FGD: Focus Group Discussants

YMI: Youth Militia Interviewees

of negotiating or attending to demands, resort to confrontation and ultimatum, then the other groups resort to violence,” or when the youths feel that “their grievances would not be acceded to by the state,” and when “people have become more conscious that you cannot get anything by peaceful means,” “violence becomes inevitable,” or “the minority groups are oppressed,” “we are being exploited,” and “the fastest way to address our grievances is direct action.” Thus militancy and violence is the last resort in the relations and contestation between the ethnic youth groups and the state and the MNCs.

While there are considerable similarities in the responses of the 3 research samples relating to ethnic marginalization and political exclusion, there are some differences. For example, political exclusion and inequity and state repression are more important as reasons underlying the militia phenomenon for the YMI, while unemployment and poverty are important for the SI and FGDs.

### III. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE YOUTH MILITIAS

The primary objective of the militia and militia activities is the struggle against marginalization and injustice, the emancipation and survival of the Ijaw nation and the Niger Delta and the promotion of ethnic interests in terms of welfare (Table 3). Quite related is the redress of the neglect and underdevelopment to which the Ijaw nation has been subjected. More specifically, the militias want to address what is considered as the long overdue disadvantages in political representation, resource distribution and developmental attention. Other objectives pertain to issues that enhance ethnic justice, welfare and sur-

**Table 3.** The Objectives of Youth Militias.

Respondents Objectives	YMI		OLI		SI		FGD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Struggle against injustice/neglect	4	40	7	70	8	16	9	28
Search for ethnic emancipation, survival interest	2	20	3	30	12	24	11	34
True federalism	-	-	-	-	6	12	-	-
Increase share of oil revenues	-	-	-	-	11	22	3	9
Redress, neglect and underdevelopment	1	10	-	-	-	-	4	12
Security	-	-	-	-	8	16	-	-
Self-determination	1	10	-	-	2	4	3	9
Increased political representation	2	20	-	-	3	6	2	6

vival as well as more benefits from oil; including self-determination, true federalism and resource control.

The neglect, injustice and marginalization of the region and the struggle for emancipation and survival and ethnic interests are the major objectives indicated by all the sample groups. The issue of increased political representation is important to the YMI and SI. Increased share of oil revenues and security are also important to the SI. That security is highlighted may suggest that to the general public, the youth militia provision of security is seen as a reason for their existence.

#### IV. OPERATIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROFILE OF THE YOUTH MILITIAS

The militia members attempt to address their grievances and achieve objectives through enlightening and sensitizing the public, the public expression of articulated grievances through representation and access to the media and press statements. As Table 4 indicates, the youth militias particularly seek dialogue and attention, representation and media coverage. Thereafter, there may be peaceful protests and rallies that sometimes turn violent. These efforts usually fail. The state and MNCs are rarely disposed. As one OLI noted, "it is always difficult to dialogue with the Nigerian government."

It is when demands and efforts are ignored that the militia members resort to what they consider as direct action which is usually violent in order to compel public, state or MNCs attention or intervention. Violence is the means of expressing annoyance and compelling attention. It is the last resort. The usual target of violence is the MNCs facilities and operations. As one FGD noted, "the only way to attack the federal government is to stop the operation of the oil companies' through violence." The violent mode of operation is reinforced by their equipment with arms and diabolical power. The violent method is more preferred because the state is usually confrontational.

As Table 4 indicates, rallies, protests and direct actions are the most common tactics utilized by the militias. These are very loud, visible, volatile and explosive, in terms of placement of issues in the public agenda with violent, destructive and disruptive consequences. But as long as these tactics yield results, they constitute the more effective method.

The failure of representations and dialogue in the relations with MNCs, is stated thus by one FGD:

"In my community, we have a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the MNCs to develop some projects. After a year, nothing was done. The youths decided to hold their management hostage. We went to their company, seized ten of their staff including expatriates. We brought them to the community. After a while, the MNCs agreed to go by the MOU. Today, there are some improvements. It is only when the people spring to action those they usually accomplishing their MOU."

**Table 4.** Operational and Methodological Profile of Youth Militias.

Respondents Tactics	YMI		OLI		FGD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Enlightenment and sensitization	2	20	-	-	3	9
Dialogue	2	20	3	30	10	31
Rallies and protest	3	30	3	30	8	25
Direct actions against oil companies	3	30	3	30	4	13
Community security	-	-	-	-	4	13
Others	-	-	1	10	3	9
Total	10	100	10	100	32	100

## V. ACTIVITY PROFILE OF YOUTH MILITIAS

Within their communities, the youth militias act as guards. They are the fighting arm of communities in the contentions, conflicts and local wars over land, MNCs locations and water resources with neighboring communities and in the event of the encroachment, damage or worse against community members and resources. They prevent crime, arrest and try and expel criminals in their communities. Some FGD indicated that they are used in some communities as a “vigilante group to check the activities of thieves and to track down criminals.” The militia members also participate in community development. They mobilize community members for community projects and communal activities. Sometimes this is under threat of force.

Furthermore, the militias sensitize the citizenry concerning issues and grievances in the Niger Delta conflict. They organize protests and demonstrations to express the plight, sufferings and grievances of the region. Through various militant groups, the militias participate in the generalized issuance of ultimata and direct actions against the MNCs as part of the agitation of the groups against the state and the MNCs. The range of actions as identified by the respondents include stoppage or disruption of oil production and operations, kidnapping of MNCs staff, hijack or take-over of facilities, piracy, manhandling of MNCs staff, damage to MNCs facilities, etc. In this realm, the militia members seek to operate outside the ambit of their elders and more specifically, outside the operational modes of petitions and peaceful and lawful agitation utilized with little success by their elders.

In the relations with the MNCs, the youth militia seek to force contribution to the development of their communities. They do this through seeking a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or at the very least, a package of develop-

ment programs from the MNCs and actions are taken to compel negotiation, signing and implementation of the MOU. Apart from the MOU, some militia groups collect regular funds from the MNCs. One FGD called it “standing monthly money from the MNCs” which the militia members may share among themselves and community members or devote to community development, as the case in a community in Ogbia, Rivers State.

## VI. PERCEPTION OF THE YOUTH MILITIAS

The respondents in the various samples tend to see the youth militia as organized standing groups of youths who protect certain ethnic interests and rights and forcefully make demands on the state, oil companies or other ethnic groupings. They are youth pressure groups that utilize militant methods and violence to compel speedy resolution of their grievances and the enforcement of decisions or actions in favor of their communal and ethnic interests. The defining characteristic is the readiness for physical combat, confrontation and the taking up of arms.

The militias are seen to be aggressive and violent (Table 5) as well as fearful, hostile and lawless. These perceptions result from the aggressive, militant, confrontational and violent methods of operation and the excesses such as the harassment and intimidation of community members and opponents. In fact,

**Table 5.** Perception of Militia Members.

Respondents Characteristic Profile	OLI		SI		FGD	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Patriotic	3	30	-	-	9	28
Intelligent and highly aware	-	-	-	-	-	-
Aggressive and violent	2	20	40	80	14	44
Supportive and friendly	1	10	5	10	-	-
Lawless	-	-	5	10	9	28
Fearful and hostile	2	20	-	-	-	-
Frustrated and self serving	1	10	-	-	-	-
Others	1	10	-	-	-	-
Total	10	100	50	100	32	100

**Table 6.** Reasons for Youth Militia Successes.

Respondents	YMI	OLI
Reasons	No.	No.
Ethnicity solidarity	1	2
Popular support	2	3
Myth/might of Egbesu	3	1
Commitment and focus of members	3	3
Others	1	1
Total	10	10

many OLI indicate that the militia harass community members, exhibit elements of criminality and engage in crime and extra judicial murders. This means that there is not just loss of focus, but also loss of control on the part of the youth militia.

Positive images co-exist for the youth militias as well. They are patriotic to the ethnic cause and interests and supportive in community development and crime management. Some OLI regard them as morally sound and emotionally stable. Some FGD stated: “the militias are very useful and we respect them,” and “They are useful in direct actions against the MNCs to press home community demands and grievances in the negotiations” with the MNCs. Or “Sometimes, they represent the community,” and “We support the militia as they demonstrate and tell the world our anger and grievances.”

## VII. FACTORS AFFECTING YOUTH MILITIA SUCCESS

The militia members agree that very little of their objectives have been achieved. But they attribute the achievements to considerable commitment of members, the assistance of Egbesu and ethnic solidarity and support. The Egbesu deity is believed to give them invincibility. The OLI while accepting the militia commitment and focus see ethnic solidarity and popular support as the main factors facilitating activities and achievements. This indicates that the militias thrive on not just the ethnicity but popular support as well within the ethnic group. It is in this sense that some refer to them as communal and ethnic militias.

The factors hindering the achievement of militia objectives are thought to be both internal and external (Table 7). Internal factors are weaknesses of the youth militia groups and bands, of low education, selfishness and greed among members, poor political control indicated in indiscipline, disunity and loss of focus. External to the YMI is the attitude of the state and MNCs which are seen as insensitive and repressive. State policies, too, have tended towards a divide-and-rule strategy to weaken the militias and undermine their support. The



**Table 7.** Factors Hindering Achievement of Objectives.

Respondents	OLI	YMI
Factors	No	No
Loss of focus	2	-
Inadequate funding	2	-
Poor political control	1	-
Weaknesses of members and militia groups	2	2
Attitude of federal government and MNCs	3	8
Total	10	10

YMI see the federal government, particularly state officials, the MNCs the ethnic majorities and the political elites as the groups that oppose their existence. This opinion is similar to that held by the OLI. Some political elites, particularly selfish political appointees and leaders, and those regarded as saboteurs are also blamed.

## VIII. THE SOCIAL BASE OF THE YOUTH MILITIAS

The YMI indicate co-operative and cordial relations with most social groups (Table 8). But the most co-operative relations tend to be with the ethnic associations, followed by the traditional rulers, the artisans and the poor. The least co-operative relations are with the elites and market women. This may be explained by the fact that these groups have more stakes in the local and national economies and therefore may have been more wary of the disruptions occasioned by militia activities.

The OLI responses about the nature of relations fairly corroborated that of the YMI. The SI responses also indicated supportive relationships with the politicians, ethnic associations and ethnic kins at home and abroad. The percep-

**Table 8.** The Youth Militia Relations with Social Groups (Ymi).

Social groups	Traditional rulers	Ethnic associations	The high social	The poor	Artisans	Market
Relations			economic class			women
Co-operative	3	7	1	3	3	2
Cordial	7	3	6	7	7	7
Not cordial	-	-	2	-	-	1
Conflicting	-	-	1	-	-	-
Total	10	10	10	10	10	10

tion of co-operative and cordial relations and perhaps support by some social groups in the community, clan and ethnic areas may be related to the utility of the militias in security and the compelling of MNCs to dialogue in relation to MOU agreements, and indicate that the militias are firmly rooted in the communities and ethnic groups.

## IX. IMPACT OF THE YOUTH MILITIAS ON THE NIGER DELTA CONFLICT

The militias have contributed to the Niger Delta struggle and politics in three major ways (Table 9): the articulation of ethnic interests, the elicitation of greater benefits in the oil economy and crime management. In the first, the militias have highlighted significantly the meager benefits and heavy costs of the oil economy to the region and have campaigned for justice, fairness and equity in the distribution of the benefits of the oil economy. In the second area of impact, the militias have compelled benefits to their communities and the region from the oil companies and the state, of which the greatest manifestation is the MNCs increasing resort to reaching a MOU with host communities. The state has also been more concerned about the development of the region. The third impact of the militias has been the deterring and curtailing of crime in the communities.

But the youth militias have also contributed immensely to the heightening of conflicts, violence, insecurity and instability in the region (Table 9), as community-based militias sometimes fight their traditional rulers, elders and tradi-

**Table 9.** Impact of Youth Militia Activities.

Respondents	SI		FGD	
	No.	%	No.	%
Consequences of Militia activities				
Ethnic intolerance	-	-	-	-
Peaceful co-existence through mutual ethnic deterrence	2	4	2	6
Furthering of ethnicity progress, unity and cultural awareness	-	-	-	-
Promotion of justice, equity and fairness	8	16	1	3
Undermining of law, order, security and safety	12	24	7	22
Undermining of democracy, national unity and development	24	48	4	13
Crime management	-	-	10	31
Attention and development	4	8	8	25
Total	50	100	32	100

tional governance structures over spoils from MNCs or divergences of opinion. As one FDG participant stated, "Some traditional rulers such as in Ikereuion local government area (LGA) in Bayelsa are in exile and operate from Port Harcourt or Yenagoa, because of the way the militias threaten them." Furthermore, the militias are used to harass and intimidate, to organize protests and to create fear among the citizenry, and to chase out of the communities some political and opinion leaders whose opinion is at variance with their activities and methods. Thus the militias are constricting the terrain of peaceful democratic competition and creating a regime of violent politics.

## X. THE STATE OF THE MILITIAS

There is considerable commitment of militia members to the militia cause and a fair level of cordial relationship between the youth militia leaderships and followers. However, there are internal problems of balkanization, disunity, factionalization and internal conflicts according to the YMI. Unlike at the initial stages of activity, they are now more localized and centered around certain prominent militia members. Some militia members are now involved in sea piracy, vandalization of pipelines, cannibalization of oil installations, bunkering and other forms of economic crimes and violence. As the Governor of Delta State has noted, "the genuine struggle for Niger Delta development has not been focused," as many activities of the militias are illegal, unlawful and violent (Gbemedu, 2003). Some militia members have become rogues and criminals who harass their communities and opponents. Some have become toll collectors from the oil servicing companies and contractors. Even community development projects have been disrupted for reasons of selfish accumulation. Some MNCs and their contractors are afraid to clean oil spillage sites or to undertake projects because of militia harassment, extortion and threats.

The disarray is partly due to the decline in the militant activities of the youths since 2000. With less activism and actions in favor of oil-based ethnic and regional grievances, the militia has become less cohesive and focused. This has created the opportunities for pursuing self-interest even in the interactions with the MNCs. There are incidences of hijack, kidnapping, ransom demands and other forms of actions that are underpinned by the desire to obtain funds for private purposes from the MNCs. Some of the militias are transforming the Niger Delta struggle into criminality for self-interest and private accumulation.

The support and use of the youth militias by political, civil and community leaders are particularly turning some of the militias into instruments for brigandage, harassment, intimidation, violence and crime. The FGD responses indicate that the militias have become or are being used as political thugs to achieve the selfish and personal objectives of some political leaders.

## SUMMARY OF SURVEY FINDINGS

My investigation found that the militias are poor, poorly educated, and unemployed youths who were a product of ethnic mobilization and solidarity in relation to ethnic grievances and interests in the oil economy. Mobilization has particularly resulted from ethnic neglect and marginalization. At the personal level, there is the aggravation of poverty and unemployment which has predisposed the youths. The objectives of the militias are the redressing of inequity and injustice relating to political representation, resource distribution and developmental attention.

The militia methods of operation commenced with the peaceful. But their recurring failure has conducted rallies and protests, and direct actions characterized with violence and armed encounters. Outside the relations with the MNCs and the state, the militias are involved in crime management, protection of communal members and resources, and community development.

The dominant perception of the militias by community members is that of aggressive, violent and fearful youngsters. But the youth militancy is highly regarded because it is a bold and courageous response to the state, and because the MNCs only respond to violence. The militias have cordial and cooperative relations with and support from most groupings in the ethnic region, such as traditional rulerships, ethnic associations, politicians, the poor and ethnic kin. The achievement of the militias is attributed to member commitment, ethnic solidarity and popular support, and the assistance of the Egbesu deity. Apart from the attitude of the MNCs and the state, other factors that limit militia activities and achievements are the loss of focus and the weaknesses of the militia members.

The militia activities while furthering crime control, enhancing developmental attention and facilitating greater equity and fairness in the oil economy, has undermined law, order, security, democracy and national unity. The state of the militias has further contributed to factional fighting, crime, violence and insecurity.

## THE PHASES OF THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE

The Niger Delta struggle for environmental, social and political equity and justice has taken place in five phases.

The first phase, which was prior to independence, began first as an agitation for special developmental attention because of the unique ecological difficulties. The region, the third largest wetland in the world, comprising estuaries, swamps, rivers, rivulets, creeks, mangrove swamp and lowland rain forest, is a difficult terrain with enormous developmental challenges. Second, it was also part of the minority agitation for special protection and development guarantees. The agitation in part resulted in the establishment of the Willinks Commission of 1958. Its recommendation led to the establishment of the Niger Delta

Development Board (NDDDB) in 1962. The struggle at this phase was a region wide political agitation led by political leaders such as Harold Dappa Biriye of the Rivers Movement. The discovery and commercial production of oil in the region intensified the agitation as it began to include the equitable reward and benefits from oil.

The second phase was a militant, brief phase in 1966. Following the weaknesses of the NDDDB and continued under-development and neglect of the region, a group of youths led by Isaac Adaka Boro, then a former cadet sub-inspector, from present day Bayelsa State, led youths in the Delta Volunteer Force (VLF) to declare a separate state of "Niger Delta Peoples Republic" from Nigeria on 23 February 1966. Their actions included recruitment and arming of militants and the seizure and disruption of oil production in Oloibiri. The VLF was suppressed and its members arrested, prosecuted and convicted for treason.

The third phase from the 1970s saw disparate, un-coordinated and localized conflicts by host communities (HCs) against the MNCs. The communities abandoned to poverty and lack of basic facilities and infrastructure even in the midst of the oil boom of the 1970s, began to direct their grievances against the MNCs. They demanded the provision of basic facilities such as roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, health and educational facilities. There were also agitations for compensation for damaged crops and croplands and cleaning of oil spillages. The most militant of the methodology of this era was the non-violent protests mainly involving blockages of the access roads to oil facilities and occupation of oil facilities.

The fourth phase (1990–1996) was occasioned first, by the insensitivity of MNCs and the state to HCs agitations. Second but more importantly, the state supported by MNCs became more repressive against the HCs agitation through attacks and murders, thus destroying the protesting communities, including Umuechem and Ogoni in Rivers State. Third, there was increased awareness of oil-based environmental degradation and the state-perpetrated injustice and neglect of the region. This led to the highlighting of the environmental and political dimensions of the struggle. The Niger Delta people began to organize the struggles through civil, community, ethnic and regional groupings. The annulment of the presidential elections of 1993, and the ensuing political crisis also led to the blossoming of more groups.

The first major group was the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) which led the Ogoni people in massive environmental protests against Shell's environmental degradation. The Ogoni Bill of Rights in August 1990 contained demands which included compensation, environmental remediation and ethnic autonomy. Other emerging groups addressed the political dimensions of the struggle for increased attention, resource allocation and the redress of inequalities in political representation. The groups in the constitutional conference of 1994–1995 won the concession of an increased allocation of 13% of oil revenues based on the derivation principle.

The heightening of the environmental and political dimension in this phase, particularly the highly mobilized and coordinated Ogoni mass movement was

met by intense repression from the state. The Ogoni region was militarized and the special military task force under Major Paul Okutimo terrorized the Ogoni region between 1992 and 1998. In 1995, after a kangaroo trial between 1994 and 1995, nine leaders of the MOSOP struggle, including its leader, Ken Saro Wiwa were hanged. The terrible repression of the Ogoni, rather than suppress, radicalized and intensified the struggle.

The fifth phase (1997–2004) has been characterized with a massive mobilization of the communities and people by communal, ethnic, pan-ethnic and regional groups, the activism and concern of civil, human and environmental rights groups and the political class, youth militancy and ethnic militias, massive disruptions of oil production and violent confrontations (Ikelegbe, 2001). The fifth phase has also been characterized by numerous shifts. First, this has been in the take-over of the activism and actions by the youths. Second has been in the shift of focus with the political elites and activist youths, from accommodative agitations to those of self-determination, self-governance and greater political autonomy (Osaghae, 2001: 10-11). Third has been the shift from the MNCs to the state as the target of agitation. The demands have become largely environmental and political, including self-determination, true federalism, resource control, state-restructuring through a national sovereign conference, the abrogation of obnoxious laws, environmental remediation and reparation for ecological devastation. Finally, there has been a shift from the merely obstructive methods of protests to direct actions and violent encounters.

## THE ROAD TO MILITANCY AND MILITIA-IZATION

Oil wealth was used to develop other parts of Nigeria while the Niger Delta region was abandoned. The region has not gained from its oil production. The region remains one of the poorest in Nigeria in terms of infrastructure, facilities, services, non-oil-based industries and other development indicators (OMPADEC, 1994: 8).

Politically, the region has been at the margin of the federal power configuration with scant political representation underlined by majority ethnic hegemony over the minority groups of the region. Furthermore, it has been disadvantaged in the resource distribution system as the region which received 50% allocation from the revenues derived from its oil resources in 1960 and 45% in 1970, had its allocation progressively decline to 20% in 1982, 1.5% in 1984 and 3% in 1992. The generalized and militant agitations compelled its upward review to 13% in 1999.

Due to the profound national economic crisis, the region's population is still largely impoverished, hungry and unemployed. There is misery, hardship, sorrow, hopelessness and neglect among the people. This has been compounded by the fact that oil exploitation has brought environmental pollution, ecological disasters and socio-economic deprivation. It has wasted scarce land and fishing waters and dislocated primary occupations, culture and communal gover-

nance and created no direct benefit nor participation in the oil activities. There have been anger, bitterness, grief, frustration, disillusionment and disenchantment among the people and a deep sense of injustice, inequity and unfairness (Ezomon, 1999). Distrust and loss of confidence pervade the relationship between the oil producing region, the MNCs and the state. The result has been friction, tension, restiveness, hostility and a penchant for militancy and violence. The communities are very hostile and on the edge, with minor disagreements resulting in conflagrations of violence. Expectedly this has been more intense among the youths.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of avenue for articulation, discussion and negotiation of problems and issues of disagreement and conflict, either with the state or the MNCs. The promises and statements of the state and MNCs have often turned empty. Even agreements with the oil companies are seldom adhered to.

The other factor was that the democratic, state and economic reform projects in Nigeria between 1986 and 1999 provided the tinder box. The pro-democracy struggles and protests against economic reform, political transition and human rights policies and practices of the Babangida and Abacha regimes in Nigeria's major cities involved direct actions in the form of violent demonstrations, protests and riots. The state reacted with repression.

Further, the 1993 annulment of the presidential elections clearly won by a southwestern Nigerian brought out the injustice and inequity of the Nigerian Federation, of which the Niger Delta was a victim. This raised to the front burner, the political issues of true federalism and national conference of ethnic nationalities as part of the democratic, liberal and state reform struggle as well as that by oppressed and marginalized nationalities. The Niger Delta crisis became part of the democratic struggle and concern of civil democratic groups and activists. These wider political dimensions emboldened the youths and made their actions more consequential.

Another factor was the prevailing response of massive repression by the state and MNCs to the Niger Delta agitation. The state repression of the Ogoni, the execution of the "Ogoni Nine," including the novelist and foremost environmental rights campaigner Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the continued repression of protesting communities made glaring the pattern of state response and the anticipation and response to further agitation.

By the mid-1990s, increased state repression, the growing insensitivity of the oil companies and the state and the persisting trickles of benefits emerging from the state and oil companies indicated the failure of the HCs methods of relations with the state and MNCs. More importantly, the youths had lost confidence in their traditional power structures and opinion leaders. The youths began to disdain the HCs methods against the state and MNCs as weak, fearful, docile and ineffective in seeking access, dialogue and agreements with an insensitive and arrogant state and exploitative and socially irresponsible MNCs. The youths sought immediate address of their grievances.

Rather than weaken or create fear, prevalent state repression hardened and radicalized the youths. Militancy has become the only option and the youths



have had to prepare to confront the state. The militia phenomenon was a direct consequence of state repression and militarization of the Niger Delta region.

Thus militancy became a more recurring feature against the MNCs since the late 1990s. The communities began to resort to extra-legal means to compel MNCs negotiations and settlements. More specifically, the communities and ethnic groups led by youths began direct actions of seizure and occupation of oil facilities, sabotage of MNCs pipelines and related facilities and disruptions of oil production.

## YOUTH MILITANCY IN THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE

Youth militancy was first incubated in the Ijaw ethnic group. This is partly because of its size as the largest ethnic group in the region and consequently a large base of unemployed and educated youths and seat of the anger, bitterness and hostility, resulting from pervading poverty, neglect and marginalization.

The first sign of generalized youth restiveness and emerging militancy was the emergence of youth groups in various communities which began to challenge the communal and ethnic traditional leaderships and to assert their place and roles in the communities and in the struggle. The youth groups proliferated across communities, clans and kingdoms of the Ijaw ethnic group. The second main development was the formation of numerous civil youth groups which spanned communities and sometimes the ethnic group and the direction of their objectives and activity towards the oil economy. Prominent among these in mobilization and activity were the Chicoco Movement and the Movement for the Survival of the Izon Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEND).

The realization of the ineffectiveness of several militant youth groups of various communities and militant civil groups led to the founding of an umbrella youth association imperative. The leadership qualities of activists and educated youths such as Timi Ogoruba (MOSIEND) and Oronto Douglas (Chicoco Movement) were also a factor particularly in the emergence of the Ijaw Youth Council and the Kaiama Declaration. These developments can be regarded as the beginning of a solid platform for a widespread, integrated, highly mobilized and educated youth activism. Thus also emerged a platform for educated, conscious and activist youths to assume leadership of the struggle and to undertake unified youth actions particularly among the Ijaws. Further, the development facilitated a movement of educated youth militant activism which soon spread to and facilitated the formation of ethnic youth groups among the Isokos, Ogbias, Egis, Urhobos and other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta.

The youth militancy signaled huge changes in the Niger Delta struggle. First, the direct actions of youths against the state and MNCs, which hitherto was in disparate disruptions and attacks in the communities, became coordinated, ethnic and large-scale direct actions. The organized youth militant groups took over the struggles and the community youths became mere agents who responded to directives of ethnic wide youth associations. Second, youth militancy vigorously

transformed the object of agitation from the socio-economic demands of development to the political dimensions of resolving the conflict. Public policy and state responses to the Niger Delta assumed the centre stage. Third, the grievance was targeted against the Nigerian state's insensitivity, neglect and the tendency for repression and violence against the Niger Delta peoples while colluding with the MNCs. Further, the struggle became that of political resolution through state reform: self-determination, federal restructuring, resource control and a national conference of ethnic nationalities. The youth also began to seek employment, contracts, equity participation in the oil economy, and relocation of the headquarters of the MNCs to the region.

The militant youths also placed the human and environmental rights dimensions of the conflict on the front burner. The struggle as it were became, in part, a challenge to the environmentally un-sustainable operations and practices of the MNCs which have grossly degraded their environment. The militant youths sought environmental cleaning and remediation and adequate compensation for environmental damages.

With the political re-direction of agitation, the MNCs assumed a second order level as object of conflict. The youths disrupted oil flow and state revenues to draw national and international attention and sympathy to themselves and their cause (Ezomon, 1999). The youth militancy eventually engaged in a much wider range of attacks which included confrontations with security agents, kidnapping of MNCs staff and hijack of MNCs helicopters and boats.

Finally, the militant youth activism and the accompanying intense repression and militarization of the region that ensued led to the militia-ization of the struggle. In the Ijaw area, the Egbesu emerged as a standing armed group. The militia phenomenon in the various communities and militant groups raised the frequency, scale and intensity of violent encounters against the state and the MNCs.

## I. THE IJAW MILITANT ETHNIC MOVEMENTS

There are several militant youth groups in the region. Within the Ijaw ethnic group, there are the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEND), the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Niger Delta Resistance Movement (NDRM) and the Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities Development Organization.

Among these, the IYC is the apex youth association. The FNDIC has been the most consistently active and militant in Delta state, where it has since 1997 been engrossed in militant confrontations with the Itsekiri, the MNCs and the state.

### 1. The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC)

The IYC is the umbrella association of youth groups in the Ijaw nation. It was formed in 1998 at Kaiama, headquarters of Kikokuma Opokuma LGA in Bayelsa State, following a meeting of over 5000 youths from 25 associations,

500 communities and 40 clans in the Ijaw Nation. The IYC was initially led by a collegiate leadership of seven which included Felix Tuodolo, Oronto Douglas, Bedford Abuele, Valentine Kuku, Roland Oweinanabo and Isaac Osuaka. The present president is Alhaji Asari Dokubo. The IYC has a national executive and zonal executives for the East, Central and Western Zones.

The IYC main objectives are the increased attention and development, abrogation of obnoxious policies that deprive the Ijaws of ownership and control of their resources, de-militarization of the region, self determination, federal restructuring, resource control and a sovereign national conference of ethnic nationalities. On 11 December 1998, it made the now popular Kaiama Declaration which declared its objectives, strategies and methods to include non-recognition of undemocratic laws that deprive the Ijaws of the ownership and control of their resources. They gave an ultimatum for oil companies to vacate their land, pending the resolutions of the issues in conflict, which expired on 30 December 1999.

Following the Kaiama Declaration, the IYC through Operation Climate Change and Operation Warfare, commenced the shut down of oil installations and the resistance against militarization, military attacks and repression in the Niger Delta in 1999. In January 1999, the Egbesu Boys, the militia arm of the IYC in response to military attacks and militarization of the Ijaw region, attacked military checkpoints and the military in the streets of Yenagoa, East-West Express Road, Ekeki Yenagoa and Kaiama. The police station at Kaiama and Odi were sacked (Suleiman, 1999; Igbokwe, 1999; Ikwunze *et al.*, 1999).

The IYC is a very militant organization, which has been the arrowhead of the youth actions and confrontations with oil companies and the state since its formation in late 1998. The IYC represents the political arm of the militant struggle while the Egbesu represents the spiritual arm.

But the IYC is not all militancy. Even in the Kaiama Declaration and Operation Climate Change that followed in 1999, it sought genuine negotiations with the state and MNCs (Osunde, 1999). The IYC has been willing to enter into dialogue. Since 2000, the IYC has insisted on dialogue but also threatened mass actions to realize the objectives of resource control, self-determination and true federalism. It has continued to agitate against the inadequacy of the 13% derivation, militarization and military occupation of oil facilities and the slow-paced establishment and poor funding of the Niger Delta Development Commission. Its militancy in recent times has been more in the form of protests and rallies. It threatened to shut all gas and oil flow stations, if by 29 May 2000, Odi in Bayelsa State was not re-built. The threat was not carried out. The IYC has organized protests in various Ijaw towns. In May 2000 in Port Harcourt, it held a rally and procession attended by over 8000 youths to commemorate the death of former Ijaw hero and activist, Major Isaac Boro (Onwuemeodo, 2000).

## 2. The Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC)

The FNDIC is a Western Ijaw group with headquarters at Oporoza, Gbaramatu clan in Warri Southwest LGA of Delta State. The FNDIC was

formed early in the cause of the Ijaw/Itsekiri conflict. It was the main youth vanguard and warfare arm of the conflict. Being an Ijaw group, it became involved in the crises between the Ijaws and the federal government over the economy of oil (Ikwunze *et al.*, 1999). Its spokesman is Frank Omare while other officials include Chief Lucky Oromini, George Timinimi, Lucky Izuokuwor and Chief David Pere (Ikwunze & Ogoigbe, 1999).

It is an armed group of youths that has been involved in violent encounters with the oil companies, the state and their Itsekiri neighbors. In the January 1999 encounters with the military in Bayelsa State, it declared about January 5 that it had dispatched more youths to Bayelsa to defend the Ijaws there. In October 1998, the FNDIC issued a letter threatening to commence full-scale insurrection and asked MNCs and foreigners to leave the region, because of the neglect, impoverishment and harassment of leaders of HCs (Suleiman, 1999). The FNDIC rejected the truce called by the Niger Delta Volunteer Force in January 1999. It also rebuffed the 1999 peace initiative of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as a presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party. It claimed that Obasanjo was part of the problem.

The FNDIC was responsible for the seizures of oil installations in the Ijaw areas of Delta State such as Ogulagha and Forcados between 1997 and 1998. The seizures were to compel government relocation of the Warri South West local government headquarters in the conflict with Itsekiri in Warri (Okafor, 1998; Amaize, 1998). Since March 2003, the FNDIC has in the course of hostilities against the Itsekiris and the federal government, stopped oil production by Shell, Chevron-Texaco and Elf in the Warri region. Nearly 40% of Nigeria's crude oil production of 2.2 m bpd halted with a total loss of over 800,000 bpd in the first week. Unfortunately, because the FNDIC actions coincided with the Allied Forces war with Iraq and low gasoline stocks in the United States, there was an increase in crude oil prices and increased volatility of the oil market (Lawal, 2003).

The Niger Delta Resistance Movement is another militant group among the Ijaws. In 2000, the movement threatened to close down flow stations and production facilities in the Niger Delta following delays in the passage of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) bill (Amazige, 2000). The Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities Development Organization has also been involved in the militancy and violent encounters in the Niger Delta. But in 1999, the group agreed to lay down arms following the mediation of then Chief Obasanjo. In the current Ijaw militia hostilities with the Nigerian state and the Itsekiris in the Warri area, the group appealed to warring Ijaw youths to lay down arms and embrace dialogue (Ezereonwu, 2003).

## ETHNIC MILITIAS IN THE NIGER DELTA: THE EGBESU MILITIA

The Egbesu is a deity and belief system, a unifying spirit and a fortifying power among the Ijaws that is claimed to guarantee initiates invincibil-

ity during justified wars. Ordinarily the deity, its priests and its claims are part of the culture of the people that has been increasingly consigned to history. But it became relevant following the increased agitation and militancy among the Ijaws and other groups of the Niger Delta. As the youths became more involved and militant, the need for fortification and invincibility of militants became imperative. The Egbesu and its priests became important as youths and other militants flocked to them to be initiated. Because of the mass belief in the efficacy and invincibility of the Egbesu, many militant youths and members of the IYC are Egbesu initiates.

The chief priest of the Egbesu shrine is the head of the Egbesu. He is consulted by the Egbesu initiates in the course of militant actions. The Headquarters of the Egbesu is the shrine at Amabulou at Ekeremor LGA of Bayelsa State. The flock of initiates following the intensification of the struggle led to resuscitation of Egbesu shrines in other communities and the appointment of other chief priests. The present chief priest is Chief Augustine Ebikeme, a prominent chief in Bayelsa State. Another important chief priest is at Egbema in Delta State. The Egbesu are armed with guns and ammunitions. They are expected to be disciplined and bound by certain rules and regulations as to morality and conduct. They can be identified by the red or white bands tied on their heads during militant encounters.

The Egbesu is the fighting arm of most militant Ijaw groups which are coordinated by and are part of the IYC. The Egbesu is not a closely knit organization because its members or initiates are actually members of various militant groups. Its roles in the struggle are not through itself as an organized and cohesive militia, but through its initiates in the various affiliate groups of the IYC. Therefore it is difficult to assign any specific actions or encounters to Egbesu as a militia group because most militant actions of the Ijaws in relation to the state, oil companies and other ethnic groups have been undertaken by the Egbesus in different militant organizations.

The Egbesu initiates have been in the fore-front of armed conflicts involving the Ijaw youths. They stormed the Bayelsa Government House on 20 July 1998 to free MOSIEND President Timi Ogoruba held by Governor Omoniyi Olabade. Between 31 December 1998 and early 1999, under the operation climate change of the IYC, they clashed with the Nigerian military and police in bloody encounters in Mbiama, Yenagoa, Kaiama and other towns in Bayelsa State which precipitated the declaration of state of emergency in January 1999. The Egbesu have fought in the Itsekiri and Ijaw conflicts in Delta (1997-1999, 2003), the Ijaw-Ilaje conflicts in Ondo State (1998-2000), the Ijaw Youth Council and Oduduwa People Congress conflict in Ajegunle, a Lagos suburb, in 2000, and the general regime of violent confrontations with the state and the MNCs.

There have been two organized groups of the Egbesu militias. The first is the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) and second, the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA). The NDVF or the Egbesu Boys of Africa was an active Egbesu group between 1998 and 2000. It was a militant group comprised mainly

of Egbesu initiates. Its members, largely youths, were fully equipped with modern firearms, had some training and were said to be bold in battle because of a sense of invincibility (Suleiman, 1999). Its coordinator and spokesman was Bello Orubebe. Alex Preye was the chief priest of the Egbesu deity to which the NDVF members were initiates. The chief priest has died, and the group no longer exists.

The group suspended action following the appeal of the Ijaw National Congress and Ijaw traditional rulers on 3 January 1999, who assured that the Federal Government was to address the problems. Consequently, the youth members were directed to vacate flow stations and other oil installations. In 1999, the NDVF warned that the organization could not guarantee the safety of foreign nationals operating in the Niger Delta.

The central demands of the NDVF included the renegotiation of the place of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian federation through a sovereign national conference and the direct allocation of oil revenues to the communities which could foster the much needed development that the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) had failed to bring about. The NDVF sought a 20% equity stake by the oil producing communities in the operation of oil companies, and employment of Ijaw youths, on quota and on merit.

The Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) attempted an organized political leadership and administrative co-ordination of the Egbesu initiates. The members of the SEA are comprised of the leaders of groups of Egbesu from different communities. The chairman is Sergeant Were Digifa. Initially, Timi Ogoruba, one of the foremost leaders of the Ijaw militant struggle and former president of MOSIEND was the administrative leader, and Felix Tuodolor, later IYC president, was secretary of the SEA. The group has remained militant and is an affiliate group of the IYC. In 2002, its leaders accused the current Obasanjo administration of subverting the resource control agitation of the IYC by causing divisions (Etim, 2001: 5).

## THE RESPONSE FROM MULTI-NATIONAL OIL COMPANIES AND THE STATE

Central to the emergence of the youth militancy and the phenomenon of youth militias were the strategies and behavior of the oil companies and the Nigerian state.

### I. MNCs STRATEGIES AND THE MILITIA PHENOMENON

The seed of militancy was sown when the oil companies disinherited the HCs in the acquisition of land and water resources for oil exploitation. By federal laws, the MNCs paid pitiable compensation since they did not seem to matter in a legal framework in which all resources were appropriated by an intensely hegemonic state. Initial protests and petitions were ignored and in the



emergent power relations, the HCs were subordinate and powerless while the MNCs were arrogant, insensitive and irresponsible.

The treatment of community demands and claims relating to compensation, oil spillages and development of the HCs were so contemptuous and prolonged, achieving pitiable results, that the local leaderships were thoroughly delegitimated. The corrupt MNCs community liaison officers created greasy corporatist relationships and networks with local elites in exchange for lower penetration costs and cordial community relations further de-legitimized the traditional governance structures. Local leaders were paid huge sums and awarded contracts to pacify their communities. Further they were not sanctioned when they appropriated MNCs payments. In several communities, traditional rulers and community elders have become corrupt (Kemedi, 2003: 18-21).

When the exasperated communities began to protest against the MNCs treatment, the MNCs invited state security agents to repress, intimidate and harass them. The humiliation and failures further undermined traditional governance systems in the HCs. Kemedi (2003: 15) noted that the oil industry is strongly "linked to the breakdown of the traditional structures in the (oil) communities." In some cases, they were compelled to hand over the responsibility for liaising and negotiating with the oil companies to youths and community development associations (Kemedi, 2003: 13).

As the traditional leadership structures were being de-legitimated, the youth leaders emerged as the new saviors. Alagoa (2000) noted that unemployed youths, in some cases have simply pushed aside, sometimes with intimidation or violence, their elders and traditional authorities seen as "ineffective against the external and internal agents that exploit the people."

The MNCs tended to relate to leadership tussles, factionalization and intra-community conflicts in terms of which faction was more powerful and potentially disruptive as opposed to which groups or factions were properly constituted and traditionally legitimate. The perception favored youth groups.

Kemedi (2003: 13-21) detailed in Nembe and Peremabiri in Bayelsa State, numerous incidences of challenges to traditional authorities and the emergence of youth leaderships. In each case, the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) accorded recognition, partnered and related with the youths, simply because the youth had more disruptive power on oil production. Therefore the youths emerged as community leaders. These youths became the power brokers, the liaison with the MNCs, and the object of MNCs patronage (Kemedi, 2003: 13-21).

The realization that violent protests and disruptive actions orchestrated immediate attention and benefits from the MNCs fueled communal and violent youth protests. By the 1990s, most of the protests and production disruptions were undertaken by youths and youth militants. Some youths began to hijack ships and helicopters, kidnap MNCs staff, and vandalize facilities in order to obtain pay-offs ransoms and payments from the oil companies.

Exasperated by this, the MNCs began to engage the youths proactively. They began a system where the youth leaders were identified and paid regularly to "sit



at home but don't disturb or disrupt our operation" with surveillance contracts to protect MNCs facilities. But the expectations, opportunities and the exaggerated living standards created through these payments have been difficult to sustain. Instead, the provisions funded the proliferation of arms and ammunitions in the region.

## II. STATE REPRESSION

Militant actions against the oil economy have always been accompanied with state repression. The mobile police and the military have been deployed against protesting communities with terrible fatalities at Umuechem in 1990, Ikebiri I and II in 1999, Choba in 1999 and Odi in 1999 (Osi, 1990; Ekeinde, 1999; Onuorah, 1999; Onwumeodo, 1999). When MOSOP began mass protests against Shell in Ogoniland, the federal government sent in a security force to maintain continued oil exploitation. The force became an army of occupation for several years that looted, maimed, raped, killed, and harassed the Ogoni people (Saro-Wiwa, 1997; Oyerinde, 1998).

Since 1997 the state has gone beyond the security veils of military and police protection for the MNCs, to massive deployments in the oil producing communities to crush even the most peaceful opposition (The Africa Fund, 1999). The federal government cracked down on Delta and Bayelsa States between December 1998 and January 1999. The recent Ijaw and Itsekiri militia confrontations and the disruptions of oil production in the Warri area of Delta State since March 2003, have been met with massive and continuous deployments of troops from the army and navy. At different points, armored personnel carriers have patrolled the region, particularly in Bayelsa State, and military check points have been installed in Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa States since 1997. The Navy has patrolled the waterways and creeks since 1999 (Obari, 1999).

The deployment of state security against protesters and militants has transformed the scale of the conflict. Following the Kaiama Declaration of 1998 and military occupation in Bayelsa, the Egbesu militias counter-attacked and resisted the military and police in bloody battles in Kaiama, Yenagoa, Ekeki Yenagoa, Oloibiri, Opia, Ikenya, Ogbia, and on the East West Express Road, where casualties and arrests counted in hundreds while about 80 soldiers were declared missing. In the encounters, the Army deployed armored personnel carriers, tanks and artillery pieces while the Navy deployed warships and fast amphibious crafts (Ikwunze *et al.*, 1999; Niger Delta, 1999; Suleiman, 1999; Igboke, 1999). Furthermore the state security agencies have generated a human rights crisis with extra judicial executions, torture, harassment, arbitrary detentions, physical assault, extortion and rape (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Military deployments and bloody encounters have persisted. The federal government commenced Operation Hakuri II in 1999 to protect properties and the oil and energy installations in the region (Onuorah, 1999). In 2003, the Federal Government set up a military task force under Brigadier General Elias Zamani, codenamed Operation Restore Hope. Since then, the task force's area of opera-

tion has been extended to almost the entire Niger Delta region, and its command encompasses the entire army formation, naval fleet and air force bases in the region (James, 2003). The government continues to see the youth militancy as a rebellion that has to be crushed (Obari, 1999).

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF MILITANCY AND MILITIA-IZATION ON THE NIGER DELTA CONFLICT

### I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION

The Nigerian state has had to make concessions. First is the increase of the revenue allocation to the region. This was accomplished in 1998 and 1999 when the 1999 Constitution provided for an increased allocation on the basis of the derivation principle from 3% to a minimum of 13%. Second is the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission with funding from the state and MNCs.

The Federal Ministry of Environment has become more active concerning the environmental practices of the MNCs. The federal government and even the international civil society and community have become more aware of and concerned about the Niger Delta conflict and its developmental, environmental and human rights dimensions, because the militia groups have placed firmly on the national agenda the issues of state reforms, true federalism, autonomy, resource control and conference of ethnic nationalities.

The MNCs have also been compelled to become more socially responsible, particularly in the form of reaching and implementing memoranda of understanding and a greater commitment to the development of the oil producing communities. Rather than hide behind the shield of state security, the MNCs are engaging the communities directly and seeking the fostering of more understanding and co-operation with the HCs.

### II. OIL PRODUCTION AND REVENUES

Militia-ization and militancy has made more difficult and hazardous the conduct and operations of oil companies and oil exploitation. Sensitive equipments have had to be withdrawn at various times causing periodic stoppages of operations and productions. Particularly, the large-scale, organized pan-community, and ethnic direct actions of the youth militants have placed at risk the entire oil industry. Once between 1998 and 1999, youths laid siege on and took control of considerable portions of the offshore and onshore oil installations and operations, particularly in Bayelsa and Delta states (Olufemi & Aganihu, 1999).

In the last quarter of 1999, oil production at the south east (Bonny Terminal) and the southwest (Forcados Terminal) was cut by more than a sixth. Nigeria fell short of its daily production of 1.98 bpd for 3 months in 1998. Production

by Shell and Agip between September to October 1998 were down by 420,000 bpd and 300,000 bpd respectively, in Bayelsa State alone (Suleiman, 1999). By August 1999, about US\$ 1 billion had been lost by the MNCs to disruptions.

In March 2003, about 40% of oil production was shut down. The Forcados crude production in the Warri area fell from 650,000 bpd to 400,000 bpd (Oduniyi, 2003). About 10 flow stations were either shut or maintained skeletal services by July 2003. Of these, the Dibi oil fields (Chevron/Texaco), Olero creek flow station (Chevron/Texaco) and the Totalfinaelf flow station at Opimamu in the Warri area were considerably destroyed (Abugu, 2003). On 29 June 2003, three expatriate workers, a German and two Philipinoes were kidnapped in Delta State by a group of Ijaw youths who demanded 25.4m naira for their release. Their release was secured after 14 days by the Delta State Governor (Okpawo, 2003). The attacks on the pipelines delivering gas to Egbin and Delta IV power stations in May 2003 cut the power generation of the National Electric Power Authority by 45% for two months. The vandalization of crude oil supply pipelines to the Kaduna and Warri refineries also led to their shut downs (Oduniyi, 2003).

In 1998, the federal government attributed the shortfall in revenue and budgetary failure to disruptions of oil production (Ezomon, 1999). The toll on the economic life of the nation of youth militancy and consequent obstructions of oil production was such that in 1999, the federal government considered the situation similar to a state of war. As a consequence of the threat to oil installations, the naval and military presence, and actions in the region have been the largest and most frequent in Nigeria since the civil war (1967-1970).

### III. CONSOLIDATION OF THE MILITIA PHENOMENON

The military occupation and repression has been resisted by youths and other groups, such as the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ), the Ijaw Elders Forum, Ijaw National Congress, Bayelsa Indigenes Association and the civil rights movement such as the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR). The NDWJ organized a protest march against militarization in Port Harcourt in 1999 (Obibi, 1999; Niger Delta, 1999). The youths have particularly seen the military occupation as provocative and oppressive. The attacks and harassment by the security agencies in December 1998 led to reprisal attacks and bloody encounters. Since 1999, the main demand of the IYC and its affiliate groups has been the immediate withdrawal from Ijaw land of all military forces of occupation and repression (The Kaiama Declaration, 1998).

The persisting military repression has consolidated the phenomena in two ways. First, the militias have become more armed, even with more sophisticated arms. Second, the encounters have become more large-scale, long-term, and intensive as the battles in the Warri region of Delta State since March 2003 indicate. Third, the militias have become even more vicious in their actions against the oil companies and other ethnic groups and communities.

#### IV. INSTABILITY AND INSECURITY

The militancy and militia-ization and the violent state responses have resulted in a vicious cycle of uncertainty, tensions, insecurity, and instability. It has created the most serious threat to Nigeria's security and survival since the civil war. Nigeria's economic and political stability has several times been threatened between 1993 and 2003.

Numerous settlements and communities have been sacked or destroyed in the confrontations. In the Itsekiri/Ijaw conflicts in Warri region in 1997 and 2003, numerous settlements were burnt or destroyed by militant youths. In the 2003 conflict, the Ijaw communities of Obumkiran, Kumtie, Seitorububor and Okerenkoko in Warri South West LGA were allegedly destroyed in the confrontations between the Nigerian military and the Ijaw youths (Fiakpa, 2003).

More recently, factionalization, leadership crises and conflicts among the youth groups have resulted in violent and bloody fighting. There are conflicts within the militia groups, between factions and between militia groups in various communities, as well as conflicts with political and community leaders.

The militias have introduced or at least heightened crime and violence in the politics of the Niger Delta region. Crime, thuggery, violent conflicts, and violent electoral and political competition have become common place. The militia phenomenon and the general state of militancy and protests have made available enormous quantity of sophisticated arms and ammunitions. All kinds of armed groups exist. With little social control, the balkanization of the groups and proliferation of arms, the situation of crime, violence, and disorder is persisting. Inter- and intra- group and community relations have become more violent.

#### V. ETHNIC IDENTITY BUILDING AND ETHNIC MOBILIZATION

The resource and environmental politics has led to the resurgence or build up of identity and solidarity among all the ethnic groups in the region. The resource conflict and the struggles underlying it represented a common problem, interest and threat to the minority ethnic groups in the region. Among the Ijaws for example, a notion of an ethnic nation threatened by an unjust Nigerian state, underlined by majority ethnic hegemony and the activities of the oil companies was constructed. The Ijaw National Congress became a more important, visible and a solid rallying point for the Ijaw nation. The youths particularly constructed a mentality of an oppressed, neglected, threatened and marginalized Ijaw ethnic nationality as well as an aggrieved group that must fight for redress and survival. It was in this sense of siege that the Ijaw nation became more assertive and confrontational in relation to the state, MNCs and its neighbors such as the Itsekiri and Urhobos.

Thus for the Ijaws, the Niger Delta conflict raised identity, ethnic unification and solidarity, ethnic mobilization and identity politics. A highly mobilized Ijaw nation has become the platform for a broad agitation in the economy of oil. The Ijaws have since become the most active and violent group in the agita-

tion in relation to ethnic rights and the contestation of state and MNCs policies as they relate to the region. Finally, it is the locus of proliferated militia groups and militia activities.

There have been considerable tensions and conflicts between the Ijaws and Urhobos, the Ijaws and Itsekiris and the Ijaws and Ilajes. The Ijaw and Itsekiri militia feud, between 1997 and 1999 and since 2003, has been a very bloody and disruptive war which has led to loss of many lives, massive destruction of villages and of properties, disruptions of oil facilities and production and general insecurity in the Warri region.

## CONCLUSION

An explanation for the transformation of the Niger Delta struggle for resource benefits from oil exploitation into a youth-spearheaded militancy, militia-ization and violent contentions has been constructed in the preceding pages.

With regards to my first proposition posited in the methodology section, I state that indeed the nature of the state and MNCs responses to youth activism conduced the emergence of youth militancy and the militias. As to the second proposition, indeed the youth militants have lost focus. But more important is the loss of social control embedded in the absence of strong leadership and organizational frameworks which has led to increased factionalization and conflicts. The loss of focus and control underpin the militia involvement in the pervading conflicts, violence, crime and insecurity in the region. As to the third proposition, there was indeed enormous support by the traditional rulership structures, associational fabric and the social groupings in the region. But that support is declining because of the loss of control and focus, involvement in conflicts and violence, and the increasingly excessive methods of youth engagement with the state and MNCs.

The consequences of the youth militancy and the militias on the region have become so gravely negative that the usual justification for their existence which was speedy and substantive results is losing ground. While some achievements can be arguably attributed to the youth militants and militias, the generalized crime, violence, insecurity, and conflicts in the region now far outweigh such achievements.

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————— Accepted May 17, 2006

Author's Name and Address: Augustine IKELEGBE, *Deptment of Political Science & Public Administration, University of Benin, P.M.B. 1154, Benin City, NIGERIA.*  
*E-mail: ikelegbe\_austine@yahoo.com*